

Intercultural Development through Intercultural Awareness and Cultural Briefing

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Abstract

One of the important features of the Erasmus+ Programme is "**Equity and Inclusion**". Equity and inclusion can be promoted by facilitating the access to transnational projects to learners with disadvantaged backgrounds (and, therefore, fewer opportunities compared to their peers). One of the personal difficulties or obstacles that limit or prevent these learners from taking part in transnational projects is **cultural differences**. Tertiary level students usually fall into this category because they face *linguistic adaptation* and *cultural inclusion* difficulties. If *linguistic adaptation* is an ongoing process due to the language courses undergraduates may or are compelled to attend, **cultural inclusion** remains an issue. Moreover, one of the aims of all Key Actions types (1, 2, and 3) is to *improve the teaching and learning of languages* and *promote the EU's broad linguistic diversity and intercultural awareness*.

Keywords: Erasmus+ Programme, Intercultural development, Intercultural awareness, Cultural briefing.

1. Introduction

The "Erasmus+ Programme Guide" emphasises, for each of its Key Actions, the following *needs related to the intercultural / European dimension* of the activities: *Key Action 1 (Learning Mobility of Individuals): Linguistic and intercultural preparation* of participants before departure and *Linguistic and intercultural support for the participants before departure*; *Key Action 2 (Cooperation for Innovation and the Exchange of Good Practices): Linguistic and intercultural preparation* of participants before departure; *Equipping both educators and youth workers with all competences and skills needed to deliver high quality services and address increasingly diverse needs such as, for instance, the needs posed by multicultural societies* and *Promoting people-to-people contacts, intercultural awareness and understanding* [1].

Though mentioned tens of time, neither **intercultural preparation**, nor **intercultural support** is mentioned among the key terms of the *Glossary* at the end of the "**Erasmus+ Programme Guide**", not to mention **intercultural awareness**.

To meet these requirements, we believe we need to develop a set of **28 activities for the raising of intercultural awareness** to be included in English classes in the 1st year of study (tertiary level) or carried out in a separate course for future Erasmus+ mobile students and teachers of other disciplines than English and a set of **33 cultural briefings** on the Programme Countries (28 EU Member States and 5 non-EU Member Countries) to be posted on the University website on the Erasmus+ page for future Erasmus+ mobile students and teachers of other disciplines than English.

Our first concern here was to clarify such concepts as **intercultural development** and **intercultural awareness**. Below is a presentation of these concepts together with the ways they can be developed in a higher education institution.

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2. Intercultural Development and intercultural awareness

2.1. Intercultural Development

What is interculturality? As we have shown in a previous article (where we define and differentiate different compounds of the word *cultural* such as *bi-cultural*, *cross-cultural*, *inter-cultural*, *multi-cultural*, *pluri-cultural* or *trans-cultural*), **interculturality** is defined as “the encounter between hegemonic and non-dominant cultures as well as frictions, overlapping, interdependencies, potentials for conflict and mutual interference caused by this” [2].

The notion of **interculturality** should, thus, be clearly distinguished from **multiculturalism** (and its political and legal claims of separate cultures which exist side-by-side) and from **transculturality** (and its emphasis on transcultural fusions and hybrid forms). One of the ways to reach **interculturality** is through language teaching [3].

How can we develop **interculturality**? According to Hammer & Hammer [4], there are ten **key intercultural learning opportunities**:

- *Books* that specifically describe and explain patterns of cultural difference and similarity, related to past, current or future cross-cultural settings:
 - Domestic (i.e., cultural groups within our own country);
 - International (i.e., cultural groups outside our own country);
- *Educational classes* focusing on:
 - Cross-cultural communication;
 - Cross-cultural relations;
 - Ethnic studies [5];
 - Gender studies [6];
- *Intercultural coaching* with an Intercultural Development Inventory Qualified Administrator with experience and training in workplace coaching [7-9];
- *Intercultural journal* (structured in terms of what happened, what one thinks were the cultural differences present, who was involved, how people responded and what was the outcome) in which one can reflect on:
 - Critical incidents (i.e., situations one has observed or been a part of in which cultural differences arose and one needed to understand and respond appropriately);
 - The cultural differences and commonalities one observes in his/her daily interactions with people from other cultural groups;
 - The ways in which these individuals perceive, value and act are similar to or different from those of our own groups;
- *Personal interactions* (i.e., intentional community, personal, social or work-related interactions with people from different cultures) focusing on cross-cultural communication with others to get an insight into:
 - How people from other cultures experience the world;
 - How the experiences of people from other cultures are similar and/or different from our own;
- *Site visits* (i.e., specific cultural/ethnic site visits) that can increase one’s knowledge about diverse cultural experiences [5]:
 - Centres;
 - Museums;
- *Theatre, film and arts* (i.e., cross-cultural movies, plays, artistic exhibits and performances, followed by post-event discussions allowing exploring the concepts presented with others who share your interest):
 - Increasing one’s own cultural self-awareness;
 - Learning about the cultural perspective found in the theatre/film/art work;
- *Training programmes* offered by our university that focus on intercultural relations:
 - E-learning training on cultural patterns;
 - Programs reviewing both culture general patterns of difference as well as culture specific dimensions;
 - Website presenting solid information on cultural differences;
- *Travel* (i.e. cross-cultural travel opportunities where one can systematically observe and engage cultural diversity – *abilities/disabilities, educational background, ethnicity/race, family background, gender, geographic/home roots, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, work experience*) [10], making efforts to experience how people from other cultural communities:
 - Interact;

- Make decisions;
- Share information;
- Treat visitors;
- *Workplace activities* organised by university committees and groups in which one can participate to build intercultural skills:
 - Joining various affiliation / affinity / employee resource groups;
 - Participating in our university's diversity (*abilities/disabilities, educational background, ethnicity/race, family background, gender, geographic/home roots, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, work experience*) [5] and inclusion efforts;
 - Taking on additional work-related responsibilities that involve cultural bridging;
 - Volunteering on diversity (*abilities/disabilities, educational background, ethnicity/race, family background, gender, geographic/home roots, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, socio-economic status, work experience*) or inclusion committees.

All these are ways of raising **intercultural awareness**.

2.2. Intercultural Awareness

What is **intercultural awareness**? To answer this question we need to understand properly **cultural awareness**. Quappe & Cantatore [11] have defined it as, "the foundation of communication" involving "the ability of standing back from ourselves and becoming aware of our cultural values, beliefs and perceptions".

Intercultural awareness involves, therefore, being aware of both one's culture and the culture(s) of others, particularly of the similarities and differences between values, beliefs and behaviours [12].

Four groups of people are most likely to need intercultural awareness [13]:

- *Expatriates/expats*, i.e. "individuals living in a country other than their country of citizenship, often temporarily and for work reasons" [14];
- *People who work globally*, i.e. individuals living in their country in a global economy and working with people from other countries and cultures;
- *People who work in multicultural teams*, in their country or abroad, with migrant workers;

- *Tourists*, i.e. people who travel to different places for pleasure.

Both students and the teaching staff of a higher education institution can, at some point in time, range in one or several of these categories. Hence, the need for **intercultural awareness**.

How can we raise **intercultural awareness**? Simply, by going [11, 13]:

- from the first level of intercultural awareness (*My way is the only way*), where people ignore or do not care that people do things differently or have different beliefs;
- to the second level (*My way is the best way*), where people are aware that other people do things differently or have different beliefs but they ignore that's appropriate;
- to the third level (*There are several ways, my way and others*), where people are aware that other people do things differently or have different beliefs and admit that this may have a merit;
- finally to the fourth level (*Our way*), where people get together to create a new, shared culture with a new meaning for everybody.

More in detail, **intercultural awareness** can be developed, according to the same authors, by [11, 13]:

- admitting that you do not know everything;
- developing an awareness of your views, assumptions and beliefs and of the way they have been shaped by your culture;
- taking an interest in finding out more about other countries and cultures;
- avoiding making judgements;
- starting checking your assumptions by confronting them with those of your pairs;
- developing empathy (thinking about how it feels to be in the other person's position);
- starting valuing gains (from both your own and someone else's views and experiences).

Among ways of raising **intercultural awareness** (starting with elementary school) [15], literature highly recommends:

- the development of pluriculturalism in teacher trainees [16];
- the inclusion in classroom of diversity awareness activities, if possible [17, 19];
- the inclusion of a course on men and masculinity [20];
- the inclusion of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex issues in the psychology curriculum [21];

- the infusion of disability issues into the psychology curriculum [22];
- the introduction, in the curricula of foreign languages, of cultural briefs about the countries students are most likely to visit as Erasmus+ students;
- the proper management of difficult classroom dialogue [23];
- the teaching of cross-cultural psychology [24];
- the teaching of foreign languages [19];
- the use of e-learning in the teaching of English as a foreign language [25, 26], despite the lack of face-to-face interaction;
- the use of proper language teaching materials [27].

3. Conclusions

Intercultural development is possible only by raising **intercultural awareness** and by **cultural briefing**.

The raising of **intercultural awareness** is, by far, the most difficult since it supposes the approach of topics still considered taboos in Romania.

However difficult it may be, it is necessary and teachers no longer can ignore them in their teaching activity.

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